

Resist? Welcome? Co-opt? Ignore? The pressures and possibilities of the REF and impact



*The increased focus on impact in research evaluation represents a range of possibilities and pressures to those academics whose work is being assessed. For some it offers an opportunity to progress social justice causes and engage in participatory, bottom-up research approaches with less powerful groups; while to others it is further evidence of the managerial audit culture that is corrupting universities, trammelling academic freedom, and which must be resisted. **Robert MacDonald** considers both perspectives and suggests that even if the REF is an example of increased governmental control, it might yet provide space to engage in a positive, progressive politics of research.*

At an early meeting of the British Sociological Association's "[Activism in Sociology Forum](#)" members met to discuss how we might play a more campaigning role in the world outside the academy. Pragmatically, academics tend to work long hours. We are faced with multiple and competing demands: teaching, administration, publishing, marketing, research, grant-bidding, and so on. The REF has ramped up the requirement to demonstrate the efficacy of our research in "the real world" (our impact upon society, economy, and culture rather than upon knowledge *per se*, or upon the academic discipline). Maybe here – I suggested, as my contribution to the meeting – was a chance for those of us interested in progressing social justice to lever officially sanctioned space, in our busy day-to-day lives, to do more of this sort of work? Maybe we should welcome the REF impact agenda?

I learned afterwards that eminent British sociologists, whom I respect enormously, regarded such a viewpoint as "[naïve](#)" and "[embarrassing](#)". Indeed, critics interpret REF as just one mode of the heightened, neoliberal, managerial control that is degrading academic life and infesting universities. So, how *should* we think about the REF impact agenda?

Because of its obvious connections with social improvement and reform through policy action, social policy is regarded as one disciplinary area that is well-placed to meet and benefit from the impact agenda. Yet there has been surprisingly [little concerted discussion](#) amongst scholars about REF and impact. This is despite the fact that many millions of pounds of public funding accrue to the proposed or claimed impact of research (with monies channelled through research councils to individual projects or via regular, six-yearly centralised assessments of the quality of research in university departments). In addition, there is substantial funding directed toward the "impact industry"; the consultants, think tanks, PR firms, funding schemes, new software programmes, impact managers, specialist impact case study authors, etc., that have become embedded in the academy.

One productive, important debate that *has* been had is that between distinguished social geographers, [Rachel Pain and colleagues](#) and [Tom Slater](#). Pain et al argue, for example, that we can use participatory, bottom-up research approaches with less powerful groups in order to co-opt the REF impact agenda in the name of social justice. Slater, on the other hand, demands that we "fight this cult"! For him the REF is another turn in the screw of the managerial audit culture that is corrupting universities. The impact agenda favours narrow, governmentally driven research questions that trammel academic freedom. [Les Back](#) came to similar conclusions after reviewing the [97 impact case studies](#) submitted to the Sociology unit of assessment of the last REF: the impact agenda has "licensed an arrogant, self-crediting, boastful and narrow disciplinary version of sociology in public".



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Critics have also questioned the simplistic, linear, cause-effect model of impact employed. The effects of research are, in fact, often unpredictable, diffuse, longer term, or nebulous and can arise from the messy influence of several projects (by different universities). One can also question the *reality* of impact. How much is ephemeral, overstated, or boastful hot air? My own work, with colleagues, provides a useful case study. The [research](#) in question debunked powerful government myths about the causes and nature of worklessness and poverty in the UK. We actively and energetically sought different ways to have research impact and could show how our research was used by national and local politicians and by welfare practitioners. Judging by qualitative feedback, we discovered that this impact case study had been awarded the highest, 4* or “world leading” ranking.

Yet within a few months of this accolade a new Conservative government was elected after a political campaign that employed *exactly* those welfare myths our research had sought to debunk. Perhaps it is more realistic to expect local effects rather than those at national or government level? I am cautious about claiming even this. For instance, one influential, north-east, social regeneration quango (with whom we had worked closely to promote the research and its findings) shortly afterwards announced a new, a multimillion-pound scheme to tackle social exclusion and youth unemployment. This new programme ignored our research and offered an analysis and policy programmes that ran *directly counter* to its main findings (e.g. “raising young people’s aspirations” is not an effective answer to a problem of youth un- and underemployment that is caused by structural flaws in the demand side of the economy).

Where does this leave us? Resist, welcome, ignore, or co-opt? This is a difficult question. The answer I offered in a recent [article](#) was in part pragmatic; there is little sign of organised resistance to the REF impact agenda and, in fact, other elements of the current “[metric tide](#)” and neoliberal assault on universities are more worrying and destructive. Even [harsh critics](#) can identify compelling, radical examples amongst the REF impact case studies. So, even if REF is primarily an example of increased governmental control, it might still provide some space to engage in a positive, progressive politics of research (amidst all the other workload pressures academics face). Local practices can disrupt how dominant narratives of REF and impact are “done” and leaders in the field (e.g. the professors that constitute REF assessment panels) have the possibility and, arguably, the duty to resist, and the chance to interpret and reform how best to think about “impact”.

This resistance might reflect – less pragmatically – a long tradition of critical, radical social science. Examples are many but could include Becker’s “[Whose Side Are We On?](#)”, Nicolaus’ “[Fat Cat Sociology](#)”, through Burawoy’s “[Public Sociology](#)”, to Giroux’s “[critical pedagogy](#)”, Bourdieu’s “sociology [as a combat sport](#)”, and Wacquant’s critical thought as “[the solvent of doxa](#)”; work that seeks [not just to interpret the world but to change it](#). Patently, this radical tradition predates any government obsession with impact. The imperative is much deeper-set than that – and it’s doubtful those cited would be supporters of the REF. It is unlikely that scholars in today’s universities will be galvanised toward critical, public social science *because* of the REF and its impact agenda, but perhaps this can help enable it?

This blog post is based on the author's article, "[‘Impact’, research and slaying Zombies: the pressures and possibilities of the REF](#)", published in the International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy (DOI: 10.1108/IJSSP-04-2016-0047).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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